

## Revisiting the E Word

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I recently attended an ordination service where the preacher, who was not UCC, reminded us that **Christendom has created two gospels; the gospel of conversion, and the gospel of justice. And his observation was simple: there is one gospel.**

I have spent my adult life in UCC churches that have been more committed to the gospel of justice than the gospel of conversion. Evangelism was defined as something people did on street corners, or by shouting at others, or even by being obnoxious. Evangelism was, in short, not a polite activity, just not something that liberal or progressive Christians did. We were the people that addressed the injustice in the world, in God's name. We left the Good News of what God could do in a person's life to those other kinds of Christians.

But it seems to me that something interesting is happening. There are signs that this **dichotomy between liberal and conservative Christian is slowly breaking down.** Our differences remain, of course. But how else to explain the movement in evangelical Christianity to embrace issues like global warming, hunger, and the spiritual pain that war brings to everyone involved? How else to explain the Still Speaking campaign, the Congregational Vitality initiative, and the participation in SCNC's recently-completed church development gathering? Or the UCC's recent declaration, fully supported by this Conference, that "**Now is the Time**", to develop and welcome 250 new congregations by 2011, and 1600 new congregations by 2021. What else are we to think of a church culture where both Jim Wallis from Sojourners and Rick Warren from Saddleback Church would identify themselves as "liberal evangelical Christians?" Can this be anything less than the Holy Spirit at work, changing God's church?

Of course, the efforts of other denominations to address justice issues can sound weak, halting, and immature to those of us steeped in the UCC's culture of being early with God's truth for the world. Evangelical Christians have much to learn, and can learn from the UCC and other progressive Christian voices, about the gospel of justice. And the UCC can also learn from Evangelical Christians about how to tell the Gospel's Good News to a much more diverse culture than existed just half a lifetime ago. The UCC and other mainline denominations have been working at this, making mistakes and learning from them, and continuing to experiment with new ways that can allow our understanding of the Gospel to reach people.

One of the most thoughtful of these efforts, a 4-year study financed by Lilly-Endowment that focused on the motivations for evangelism and effective examples in mainline churches, has recently been published. The book is called **Unbinding the Gospel** by Martha Grace Reese, available through Chalice Press. It manages to be insightful of the condition of mainline churches, descriptive and entertaining about the nature of our evangelistic challenge, with a practical guide for congregations to assess how they are

doing and see where they can go from there. If you missed the **Church Vitality Conference** in February, or if you attended but are looking for a way to follow up at your church, I would recommend it highly. And over the next few months, please let me know how this experiment in Evangelism is playing out in your church. We're in this together.